

Abraham Lincoln papers

Abraham Lincoln, Fragment "The Legitimate Object of Government is... ." ¹, [1840s?]

1 Nothing is known about the circumstances that gave rise to this document. The conjectural date assigned this document by Nicolay and Hay, July 1, 1854 is no help, as it appears unfounded. What Lincoln thought was the proper and legitimate object of government would become a momentous matter when he became president of a nation in peril of dissolution, but the document does not seem to have been written with that in mind. What is on view in this document, and one that seems to be a revision of it (see *Collected Works*, II, 221-22), is Lincoln's attempt to state as concisely as possible what the core business of government was and, by implication, what it was not. It may well belong to the period of his election to and service in Congress (1846-49).

The legitimate object of government, is to do for a community of people, whatever they need to have done, but can not do, at all, or can not, so well do, for themselves — in their separate, and individual capacities—

In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, goverment ought not to interfere—

The desirable things which the individuals of a people can not do, or can not well do, for themselves, fall into two classes; those which have relation to to wrongs, and those which have not— Each of these branch off into an infinite variety of subdivisions—

The first — that in relation to wrongs — embraces all crimes, misdemesnors, and non-performance of contracts— The other embraces all which, in it's nature, and without wrong, requires combined action, as public roads and highways, public schools, charities, pauperism, orphanage, estates of the deceased, and the machinery of government itself—

From this it appears that if all men were just there still would be some, though not so much need of goverment—